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SOME NEW VOLUMES OF VERSE.*

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

THE intelligence and temperance with which the late James C. Onderdonk has done his work in the "History of American Verse" are such as to deepen, at each page of his book, the regret one must feel for his early death. We are told, in the introduction to his posthumous volume, that if the author had lived the chapter on the latest of our poets would probably have been enlarged and revised; and in taking up some of their latest poems I have been haunted by a wish, which I cannot dismiss, that he might have dealt with them, and could have remained to deal with other new poets as fast as they manifested themselves in new poems. Justice is in all cases difficult, though praise is easy, and blame is easy; but justice is most of all difficult in the case of those whom we must judge straight from our consciences and not roundabout through our acquaintance with the judgment of others. I think Mr. Onderdonk was peculiarly fitted to render the direct sort of justice, for he brings it to bear even upon writers who have been judged so often that they seem to pass sentence on themselves as soon as they are named. He begins with our beginnings, and he ends with our endings, or so nearly that the poets of the last decade of the nineteenth century receive the same impartial, the same sincere, the same courteous, study that he bestows on the poets of the first decade of the seventeenth century. He shows himself a connoisseur of poetry who can feel passionately but

* "A History of American Verse (1610-1897)." By James C. Onderdonk. McClurg & Co.

"Lincoln, and Other Poems." By Edwin Markham. McClure, Phillips & Co.

"Poems of the Past and Present." By Thomas Hardy. Harper & Brothers.

"Weeds by the Wall. Verses." By Madison Cawein. John P. Morton & Co.

"A Gage of Youth. Lyrics from the Lark and Other Poems." By Gelett Burgess. Small, Maynard & Co.

"More Animals." By Oliver Herford. Charles Scribner's Sons.

speak dispassionately, who can cherish a grateful appreciation of beauty without a sentimental overflow, who can recognize a fault without the schoolmasterly impulse to punish it. I might name things in which I disagreed with him, but in most things I have agreed with him, and thought it to my credit that I did so. All his criticisms, I should say in the large way which I might later wish to hedge from, are based upon reasons which he gives, and upon grounds which he proves solid. I should like to allege other instances, but time and space are both short, and I must content myself with alleging for sole evidence the passages which he devotes to the study of Longfellow. His judgment of a poet, whose genius was at once so simple and so fine, so universal and so exceptional, is as nearly the measure of it as it has ever got; and it is most where one reads those passages of his book, that one feels the bereavement of our literature in his loss.

I.

I like to indulge the fancy of this intelligent and temperate critic taking up Mr. Edwin Markham's "Second Book of Verse" and sharing my own pleasure in finding it better than his first. In "Lincoln and Other Poems" there is no Man with a Hoe, who might have been expected there, and perhaps feared; but Mr. Onderdonk would have been glad to recognize that this Man was present in the qualities which gave the poet his hold on the common heart, while absent in the defects that made his hold slip from the uncommon head. Here is something of the eloquence, tending to elocution, with much more than the earlier proportion of the poetry which neither head nor heart can deny in Mr. Markham's former volume. We are still a good deal exhorted, as we need to be, unless we are left to forget the misery which the world is nearly as full of as ever; but we are charmed a good deal more. The moral level of the verse is as lofty as it was before, but we have not the same sense of jolting from peak to peak. In the appeals to humanity there is something more of consideration for human nature: not quite the human nature that those imagine who would have it remain as bad as it is, or worse, but the human nature which will not stand too much girding up, and is better at making fresh starts than long runs in the right direction. Possibly, I read these ameliorations into the book, but I will abate nothing of my confidence as to its positive excellences, for I could

prove them from it much more often than these envious limits will let me. I am sure that I feel a sort of dynamic picturesqueness in the notion of

"the Matterhorn

That shoulders out the sky;"

and the line that tells me Lincoln

"Held the long purpose like a growing tree,"

really adds to the history of the man. The picturesqueness prevails again in the statement that

"he went down

As when a kingly cedar, green with boughs,

Goes down with a great shout upon the hills,

And leaves a lonesome place against the sky."

and here again the picturesqueness is most dynamic.

I could wish, indeed, that Mr. Markham, in saying that "the Norn-Mother"

"took the tried clay of the common road,"

for the stuff of her greatest son, had not forgotten how Lowell had already said that Nature (a more familiar name for the Norn-Mother, though not so mouth-filling), threw aside her "Old-World moulds,"

"And choosing sweet clay from the breast

Of the unexhausted West,

With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,"

just as I could wish he had remembered that Gray asked

"Can storied urn or animated bust

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?"

when he declares that

"The soaring pillar and the epic boast,

The flaring pageant and the storied pile,

May parley with Oblivion awhile."

When he writes

"The pomp, the arch, the scroll, cannot beguile

The ever-circling Destinies that must

Mix king and clown into one rabble dust,"

he seems to blend an echo of the Elegy with that of an elder elegy:

"Sceptre and crown

Must both lie down

And in the dust be equal made

With the poor, crooked scythe and spade."

But no one whose praise is worth having, or whose blame is to be feared, will accuse our poet of more than a reverberation of the nerves reporting itself in his verse, though even this is a pity; and it is to be more regretted because such a great line as

"May parley with Oblivion awhile"

is not only of an unimpeachable indigeneity, but is of a growth that may be said rather to abound with him. There are many fine passages in his book, and there is hardly any faultiest poem but is redeemed by some high thought, some splendid turn of phrase. These often touch the heart as well as illumine the mind, so that one almost ascribes merit to one's self when in "The Sower" one thrills at the magnanimous words:

"The grime of this bruised hand keeps tender white
The hands that never labor, day or night;
His feet that only know the field's rough floors
Send lordly steps down echoing corridors."

It is with a fellow feeling yet more mystical and sweet, that, turning from the lurid picture of "The Wall Street Pit," one rests one's soul in a glimpse of "stiller ways," where the lives of men "grow softly as the apples on a bough." "A Mendocino Memory" is a lovely idyl, full of youth and gladness, and "Which Was a Dream" suggests mysteries "deeper than did ever plummet sound." In such things Mr. Markham attests his quality as poet; and the poet is more precious than the preacher, though the world is better, or always just going to be better, for preaching. I do not say that good people resent his appeals and reproaches, but the bad people might be humored a little, and persuaded that the poet means them no harm by his preaching. There are signs, amusing signs, however, that those who have most resented it, and most bidden the poet go to because of it, are resenting it less. Some of the reviews of his new book say that there is a glad note of optimism in it, as if optimism were a virtue in itself or pessimism a vice; and I would have him realize that such reviewers only mean that they have got used to his pessimism, if it was pessimism; they do not know, poor souls! Yet, and yet, if the little piece with which I shall leave him were to be his farewell to the pulpit, I should not be sorry in one wise, though still I should be sorry:

WIND OF THE FALL.

"I hear that wail in the windy pine,
And I suddenly know;
It wakes in my breast a dream divine,
And a sacred woe.
I heard that cry from your spirit then,
Oh, wind of the Fall!
I too have carried the grief of men;
I have felt it all."

II.

Whatever any one may say of Mr. Markham's optimism, no one can say of Mr. Thomas Hardy's pessimism, that it is less in his second volume than it was in his first, and I, for my part, could not wish it less, for pessimism may be a very good thing, if not a cheerful. It is apt, at least, to be spontaneous and honest after one gets to be fifty, and ashamed of the follies of forty—in others. There is, possibly, too much unreasoned gayety in a world where death is, and youth fades and love passes, often before death comes. Pessimism can commonly give a reason for itself, and optimism at most only the excuse that it is a fine day, or its dinner has agreed with it. But even pessimism without a cause, if it results in poetry like Mr. Hardy's, is justifiable, and if it is his increased pessimism which has made "Poems of the Past and Present" better than "Wessex Poems," one must wish it to abound in him more and more. In the meantime, I have been reading his new book with the solid comfort which sometimes only solid gloom can bring, and I have felt very curiously in his poems the qualities which, in more dramatic appointments, affect me finally from his fiction; it is as if I had been reading all his novels over again. The humor, indeed, except in the sparest glimmers, is absent, for one can hardly call the grim mocking in certain of the pieces by that kindly name, that almost weakly sentimental name; and there is no compensation in the way of the smoother and sleeker shapes of beauty, though if one likes such forms of it as do not know themselves from truth, one will not want for joy in these joyless portraits and landscapes. There is not even the small sum of impersonated feeling that there was in the "Wessex Poems"; the thinking is straight from the poet to the reader, with seldom an interpreter in character or story, though there is now and then a sardonic allegory, and now and then an interlude of such an eery mirthsomeness that one could wish it less merry or less ghastly. For illustration, I commend to the robuster sort of reader that peculiar "riddle of the painful earth" which the poet calls "God-Forgotten." I must not risk shrivelling this sensitive page by giving it here entire, and may only intimate that the poet fancies the Creator to have forgotten that He had made the earth and to be recalling the fact with difficulty.

“ ‘T lost my interest from the first,
My aims therefor succeeding ill;

Haply it died of doing as it durst?"—

"‘Lord, it existeth still.’"

"‘Dark, then, its life! For not a cry
Of aught it bears do I now hear;
Of its own act the threads were snapt whereby
Its plaints had reached mine ear.

"‘It used to ask for gifts of good,
Till came its severance self-entailed,
When sudden silence on that side ensued,
And has till now prevailed.

"‘And other orbs have kept in touch;
Their voicings reach me speedily:
Thy people took upon them overmuch
In sundering them from me!

"‘And it is strange—though sad enough—
Earth’s race should think that one whose call
Frames, daily, shining spheres of flawless stuff
Must heed their tainted ball!

"‘Thou should’st have learnt that *Not to Mend*
For Me could mean but *Not to Know*;
Hence, Messengers! and straightway put an end
To what men undergo.’"

"Homing at dawn, I thought to see
One of the Messengers standing by.
—Oh, childish thought! . . . Yet oft it comes to me,
When trouble hovers nigh."

There is, possibly, a faint ray of hope in the closing lines of this unflattering poem, but it is not such as to be sharply discordant with the prevailing mood of Mr. Hardy’s volume. He writes verse, as he writes prose, like no one else, and those who do not enjoy his thinking will hardly enjoy his singing. His strong lines have small disposition to trip upon the tongue, but such a piece as "The Ruined Maid" haunts the ear with its crazy lilt, while it pierces the heart with a meaning all too sane.

III.

One never praises an author for certain things without afterwards doubting if they were the characteristic things, or whether just the reverse might not be said. Praise is, in fact, a delicate business, and I, who am rather fond of dealing in it, never feel it quite safe. Not only is it questionable at the moment, but the later behavior of the author is sometimes such that one is sorry

not to have made it blame. It is always with a shrinking, which I try to hide from the public, that I take up the fresh venture of a poet whom I have once bet on. But there is a joy when I find that I have not lost my wager which is full compensation for the anxiety suffered. This joy has lately been mine in the latest little book of Mr. Madison Cawein, whose work I long ago confessed my pleasure in. I am not sure that he has since transcended the limits which he then seemed to give himself as the lover, the prophet, of beauty in the woods and waters and skies of the southern Mid-West. I do not know that he need have done more than unlock the riches of emotion within these limits. What I am sure of is that in "Weeds by the Wall" he has more deeply charmed me with an art perfected from that I felt in "Blooms of the Berry" ten or fifteen years since. Many little books of his have come (I hope not also gone) between the first and last, and none of them has failed to make me glad of his work; and now again I am finding the same impassioned moods in the same impassive presences. To my knowledge, no such nature-poems have been written within the time since Mr. Cawein began to write as his are, or from such an intimacy with the "various language" which nature speaks. There are other good poems in the book, poems which would have made reputes in the eighteenth century, and which it would be a shame not to own good in the twentieth; but those which speak for "The Cricket," "A Twilight Moth," "The Grasshopper," "The Tree Toad," "The Screech Owl," "The Chipmunk," "Drouth," "Before the Rain," and the like, are in a voice which interprets the very soul of what we call the inarticulate things, though they seem to have enunciated themselves so distinctly to this poet. It is cheap to note his increasing control of his affluent imagery and the growing mastery that makes him so fine an artist. These things were to be expected from his early poems, but what makes one think he will go far and long, and outlive both praise and blame, is the blending of a sense of the Kentucky nature with a sense of the Kentucky civilization in such a poem as "Feud":

"A mile of lane,—hedged-high with ironweeds
And dying daisies,—white with sun, that leads
Downward into a wood; through which a stream
Steals like a shadow; over which is laid
A bridge of logs, worn deep by many a team,
Sunk in the tangled shade.

Fields over which a path, o'erwhelmed with burrs
 And ragweeds, noisy with the grasshoppers,
 Leads,—lost, irresolute as paths the cows
 Wear through the woods,—unto a woodshed; then,
 With wrecks of windows, to a huddled house,
 Where men have murdered men.

“A house whose tottering chimney, clay and rock,
 Is seamed and crannied; whose lame door and lock
 Are bullet bored; around which here and there
 Are sinister stains. . . .
 Within is emptiness: the sunlight falls
 On faded journals papering the walls,
 On advertisement chromos, torn with time,
 Around a hearth where wasps and spiders build.—
 The house is dead; meseems that night of crime
 It too was shot and killed.”

“Civilization” may not be quite the word for the condition of things suggested here, but there can be no doubt of the dramatic and the graphic power that suggests it, and that imparts a personal sense of the tragic squalor, the sultry drouth, the forlorn wickedness of it all. By such a way as this lies Mr. Cawein's hope of rise from Nature up to Man, if it is up; and also, as I perceive too late, lies confusion for the critic who said that the poet does not transcend the limits he once seemed to give himself.

IV.

With Mr. Gelett Burgess's book I have not quite the embarrassment I had in taking up Mr. Cawein's. I am at least not committed to it by any earlier praise, and I may say what I please of it, without having to look after my consistency. The best thing in it is, I think, a certain “Sestina of Youth and Age,” which has a sweetness and tenderness of its own, and expresses a phase of the common experience not recognized before:

“My father died when I was all too young,
 And he too old, too crowded with his care,
 For me to know he knew my hot, fierce hopes.
 Youth sees wide chasms between itself and age—
 How could I think he too had lived my life?
 My dreams were all of war, and his of rest.”

That is a beautiful poem, from first to last, truly felt and rendered in a spirit of fine repose. If I say it is the best thing in Mr. Burgess's book, I hope that I do not dispraise the other pieces, which, indeed, I wish had made room among them for more

of those gayer caprices of "The Lark," more associated with the author's manner and more characteristic of his fancy.

V.

Mr. Oliver Herford braves it out where Mr. Burgess seems to shrink from owning his antic muse, and in a book of "More Animals" he gives us again the wise nonsense that edifies and consoles. If it is by a *tour de force* that one groups him with the poets, he is worth that outlay of strength, and the poets ought to be glad of his company. His book is at least a new volume of verse, and is of a freshness which the critic, panting from his exertion, might overstate, but probably would not if he meant its delightful audacity, its perennial unexpectedness. Mr. Herford's humor, both of pen and pencil, is personal to himself, like Mr. Gilbert's, but it hospitably insists upon making itself the reader's at the same time, for it is difficult not to learn "The Animals" by heart. In fact, you are rather obliged to do that, if you will not have them tagging after you in fragments and haunting your memory piece-meal. Among them all, I believe I like the *Gnu* best, for reasons that will appear when I repeat it:

"Beware, my dear, if ever you
Should chance to come across a gnu.
You may be fair, and tall and svelte,
But do not hope the gnu to melt.
You may be gentle, kind and true,
These things mean nothing to the gnu.
You may love beasts, both great and small,
That won't affect the gnu at all.
You may be generous, you may
Subscribe to the S. P. C. A.
All this of no avail will be,
The only thing's to climb a tree;
And if there is no tree to climb,
Don't say you were not warned in time."

Yet, when I have tried to account for my liking the *Gnu* best, the *Octopus*, the *Shark*, the *Dodo* and all the rest rise up to reproach me; and without the picture of the young lady swarming up the palm, I do not feel that the mere literary testimony of the *Gnu* quite justifies me. It is much simpler to make my escape by owning them all good than to insist upon a distinction that may seem invidious. Whatever Mr. Herford touches, at least in the animal kingdom, he gives something of the amiable grace of his own fantastic spirit, so that the most dreadful of his beasts seem so half in joke.

W. D. HOWELLS.